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TAGS: PREL KPAO MY

SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: PRESIDENT OBAMA'S PHONE CALL TO PRIME MINISTER NAJIB

Summary and Comment

¶1. (U) Local press in Malaysia gave broad, positive coverage of the June 26 phone call between President Obama and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. The media reports highlighted what the PM described as the President's positive tone and praise for Malaysia, while also mentioning their discussions about the economy, globalization, and the fate of the two Malaysian prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay. There have been few editorials on the conversation, and thus far no major political figures, apart from PM Najib, have publicly commented on the phone conversation. The Ambassador gave an interview June 29 to TV3, Malaysia's largest television station, at their request for U.S. reaction to the call.

PM Najib Very Upbeat About Call

¶2. (U) The phone call between President Obama and Prime Minister Najib on the evening of June 26 made major TV news headlines on June 27, and all major dailies and several online news sites carried stories on the exchange. All subsequent articles originated from one article published by Malaysia's government-influenced news service, Bernama, to whom the PM gave an exclusive interview immediately following the phone call. Headlined "Obama Praises Malaysia says Najib," the article provided a brief synopsis of the conversation between the PM and POTUS as related by the PM to reporters during his address to a group of entrepreneurs attending the Malay Chamber of Commerce Malaysia dinner on June 26, just following the phone call.

¶3. (U) The PM mentioned that President Obama had praised Malaysia's uniqueness and advantages. According to Najib, the President told him that he should be proud of Malaysia "because you are a modern, progressive Muslim country, able to manage a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society." Najib also said that the relationship between Malaysia and the United States was important as Malaysia is now moving into a new era in the world economy involving not only the globalization process but also the "New world Economy." Najib added: "When we are faced with the challenge of the network economy, we need then to strengthen our position by networking with others. When we talk about networking at the global level, Malaysia has a uniqueness and advantage. These represent Malaysia's strength, as we can claim to be one of those countries which are a gateway to other countries."

¶4. (U) Najib subsequently wrote June 27 in his blog, www.1Malaysia.com.my, that "I explained to him (the President) that Malaysia shares significant common grounds with the United States of America in that we strongly believe in the ideals and principles of democracy, including

accountability and transparency. I also spoke about the initiation of the 1Malaysia concept and how the sense of togetherness and belonging will help Malaysians move forward with a common purpose." Najib added "I expressed that I was looking forward to working closely with him. President Obama graciously acknowledged my ability to serve as prime minister based on my extensive background in the public service."

All Media Reports Positive

¶15. (U) In other headlines in English, Malay, and Chinese language dailies, the phone call between the two heads of state was characterized as a "salute" from President Obama to PM Najib, with prominent mention of Najib's invitation to the U.S. President to visit Malaysia. The New Straits Times quoted the PM as saying that the phone conversation left him with "a sense of optimism towards our relationship with the United States of America," and that he looks forward to renewing Malaysia's ties with the United States under President Obama's administration and hope to explore solutions and opportunities to mutually benefit both countries in the immediate and long term.

¶16. (U) Several local dailies published an article by Bernama focused on the issue of President Obama's willingness to consider Malaysia's request to return two Guantanamo detainees of Malaysian nationality. The PM told Bernama after receiving the call from Obama that he had conveyed to him Malaysia's willingness to accept the two detainees and that their detention could continue in Malaysia. He said President Obama welcomed this offer and told him that he

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would relay Malaysia's request to the security agencies involved. "I told him we would detain them in Malaysia but would treat them according to international norms and in a humanitarian manner," PM Najib was quoted as saying.

¶17. (U) As of Tuesday, June 30, only a limited commentary referencing the phone call had appeared in local press. China Press on June 28 published an article that gave a positive view of the significance of the conversation between the two leaders: "Following the communication between Najib and Obama, it is hoped that the strained relations between Malaysia and the U.S. would be mended and strengthened. During the Mahathir era, the former Prime Minister used to condemn the U.S. for its global hegemony, resulting in an impasse between Malaysia and the U.S. for a long period of time. As the world enters an era of globalization, there are practically no boundaries between one country and another. Thus, the forging of good relations between countries of the world community is indispensable. It is far better to settle an issue through negotiation rather than condemning another nation for their faults. As such, we hope Obama could visit Malaysia to see personally the significance of our multi-racial country, thus creating a new chapter in U.S.-Malaysia relations and, most of all, forging a closer rapport between the two countries in terms of bilateral trade and investment."

¶18. (U) A subsequent article published by Bernama on June 29 stated that the telephone conversation between PM Najib and President Obama marked a new milestone in political and economic relations between the two countries. Bernama interviewed Ahmad Ikram Abdullah, a fellow at Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), who stated that the phone conversation is evidence of Obama's seriousness in enhancing ties with Malaysia. Ahmad stated "It generates positive vibes and is indicative of a fresh bid towards building a new era in bilateral relations." Ahmad said Obama's call showed his humility and sincerity in trying to improve U.S. ties with Malaysia. Another notable point of the conversation, he said, was Obama's recognition of Malaysia as an example of a progressive Muslim-majority country. "It is a reflection of Obama's recent address to

the Muslim world in Cairo," Ahmad added.
KEITH